Iceland

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, the State financially supports and promotes Lutheranism as the country's official religion.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. The Evangelical Lutheran Church, which is the state church, enjoys some advantages not available to other faiths in the country and provides social services regardless of creed.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom, and there have been no reports of religious persecution.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 39,600 square miles, and its population is approximately 293,577. Most residents live on or near the coasts. The area surrounding the capital, Reykjavik, is home to approximately 60 percent of the country's total population.

According to the National Statistical Bureau, 250,661 persons (85.5 percent of the total population) are members of the state Lutheran Church. During the period covered by this report, a total of 1,123 individuals resigned from the Church, as against 170 new registrants. Many of those who resigned from the state Church joined one of the Lutheran Free Churches, which have a total membership of 13,155 persons (4.5 percent of the population). The breakdown in membership is as follows: Reykjavik Free Church--6,202; Hafnarfjordur Free Church--4,365; and Reykjavik Independent Church--2,588. A total of 13,598 individuals (4.6 percent) are members of 22 other small recognized and registered religious organizations ranging from the Roman Catholic Church (5,775 members) to the First Baptist Church (10 members). There were 8,733 individuals (3 percent) who belonged to other or nonspecified religious organizations and 7,144 (2.4 percent) who were not part of any religious organization. There also are religions, such as Judaism, that have been practiced in the country for years but have never requested official recognition. In official statistics, these religions are listed as "other and unspecified." The National Statistical Bureau does not keep track of Jewish community numbers, and there is no synagogue or Jewish cultural center; however, up to 60 people attend occasional Jewish holiday parties and themed lectures and discussions organized by a few Jewish immigrants.

Although the majority of citizens use traditional Lutheran rituals to mark events such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals, most Lutherans do not regularly attend Sunday services. In a March 2004 Gallup poll, only 10 percent of respondents stated that they attend ordinary church services one or more times a month, while 43 percent stated they never attend church.

According to statistics provided by the immigration authorities, the number of foreigners receiving a residence permit has increased significantly during the past several years. In direct relation to the increase in foreigners (itinerant workers, immigrants, and refugees), the number of religious organizations has significantly increased. Foreigners make up more than half of the Roman Catholic population. The Reykjavik Catholic Church holds one service each week in English, and many Filipinos attend. A growing number of Catholic Poles live in the country, where they work in the fishing and shipbuilding industries. Two Polish priests serve the Polish Catholic community. Since there are few Catholic churches outside of Reykjavik, Lutheran ministers regularly lend their churches to Catholic priests so that they may conduct Masses for members in rural areas.

The Association of Muslims in Iceland (Félag Múslima á Íslandi), founded in 1997, has 329 members (out of approximately 800 Muslims living in the country according to the Association). Muslims are mostly concentrated in the capital area, although there are a number of Kosovar Muslim refugees in the small northern town of Dalvik. Since 2002 the community has had its own house of worship, with daily prayer nights and weekly Friday prayers that attract a core group of approximately 30 individuals. A 2000 application for land to build a mosque has languished in Reykjavik's planning commission, apparently because of a dispute between Association members and city planners about the project's size.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) accounts for the only significant foreign missionary activity in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The official state religion is Lutheranism.

The Constitution provides all persons the right to form religious associations and to practice religion in accordance with their personal beliefs. It also bans teaching or practices harmful to good morals or public order. In addition, the General Penal Code protects religious practice by establishing fines and imprisonment for up to three months for those who publicly deride or belittle the religious doctrines or worship of a lawful religious association active in the country.

Article 62 of the Constitution establishes the Evangelical Lutheran Church as the state church and pledges the State's support and protection. Parliament has the power to pass a law to change this article. Although surveys show that the majority of citizens favor the concept of separation of church and state, most probably would not support the change if it meant closing Lutheran churches because of lack of funding. Although few citizens regularly attend services, they see the Lutheran religion as part of their culture and view the closing of a church as losing a part of their heritage. In October 2004, the Alliance Party presented a parliamentary motion on constitutional amendments that included a clause calling for consideration of the separation of church and state. The Liberal Party had presented a similar bill in 2003. Neither initiative has yet made it out of committee. Sidmennt, the 160-member Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association, strongly supports legislation to separate church and state. A 2004 Gallup poll found the general population evenly split on the issue.

The State directly pays the salaries of the 147 ministers in the state church, and these ministers are considered public servants under the Ministry of Judicial and Ecclesiastical Affairs. These ministers counsel persons of all faiths and offer ecumenical services for marriages and funerals. The State operates a network of Lutheran parish churches throughout the country. In new housing areas, land automatically is set aside for the construction of a parish church to serve the neighborhood.

A 1999 law sets specific conditions and procedures that religious organizations must follow to gain state subsidies. All taxpayers 16 years of age and older must pay a church tax amounting to approximately $125(ISK 7,800) a year and a cemetery tax of approximately $48 (ISK 2,952) a year. Individuals are free to direct their church tax payments to any of the religious groups officially registered and recognized by the State. For persons who are not registered as belonging to a religious organization, or who belong to one that is not registered, the tax payment goes to the University of Iceland, a secular institution. Atheists have objected to having their fee go to the University, asserting that this is inconsistent with the constitutional right of freedom of association.

During the period covered by this report, the Government gave the state church approximately $62 million (ISK 3.9 billion). Of that amount, the church tax funded $22 million (ISK 1.4 billion), the cemetery tax $11.5 million (ISK 714 million), and general revenues $29 million (ISK 1.8 billion). The state church operates all cemeteries in the country, and the $11.5 million from the cemetery tax must be used solely for this purpose. All recognized religious denominations have equal access to the country's cemeteries. The church tax also provided a total of $2.4 million (ISK 151 million) to the other recognized religions and a total of $1.5 million (ISK 93 million) to the University of Iceland.

The Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs handles applications for recognition and registration of religious organizations. The law provides for a three-member panel consisting of a theologian, a lawyer, and a social scientist to review the applications. To become registered, a religious organization must, among other things, be well established within the country and have a core group of members who regularly practice the religion in compliance with its teachings. All registered religious organizations are required to submit an annual report to the Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs describing the organization's operations over the past year. The law also specifies that the leader of a religious organization must be at least 25 years old and pay taxes in the country. No restrictions or requirements are placed on unregistered religious organizations, which have the same rights as other groups in society.

Law Number 108/1999 confirms that parents control the religious affiliation of their children until the children reach the age of 16. However, the Children's Act requires that parents consult their children about any changes in the children's affiliation after the age of 12. In the absence of specific instructions to the contrary, children at birth are assumed to have the same religious affiliation as their mother and are registered as such.

Under Law Number 66/1995, which regulates public elementary schools, the Government requires instruction in Christianity, ethics, and theology during the period of compulsory education; that is, ages 6 through 16. Virtually all schools are public schools, with a few exceptions such as a Roman Catholic parochial school located in Reykjavik. All schools are subject to Law Number 66 with respect to the compulsory curriculum. However, the precise content of this instruction can vary, and some observers have claimed that indoctrination can take place, as the curriculum is not rigid and as teachers often are given wide latitude in the classroom. Some teachers place greater emphasis on ethical and philosophical issues rather than on specifically

religious instruction. Lessons on non-Christian religions are part of the curriculum, but teachers ultimately teach mostly about Christianity. The rationale behind the focus on Christianity in religious instruction is based on the creed's historically strong influence on the country's society and culture.

Students may be exempted from Christianity classes. The law provides the Minister of Education with the formal authority to exempt pupils from instruction in compulsory subjects such as Christianity. In practice, individual school authorities issue exemptions informally. There is no obligation for school authorities to offer other religious or secular instruction in place of Christianity classes.

According to a report published in 2003 by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), in some cases children find it difficult to obtain exemption from religious instruction, particularly at the primary level. In addition, members of several non-Christian organizations expressed their concern to ECRI that students ridicule classmates who opt out of religious education. The ECRI report urged school officials to provide children who do not wish to attend religious instruction in Christianity with alternative classes. The report also asked officials to give all children the opportunity to learn about different religions and faiths.

The Government does not actively promote interfaith understanding. The Government does not sponsor programs or official church-government councils to coordinate interfaith dialogue, but many church groups sponsor meetings between the leaders of the various religious organizations. A Japanese-born minister of the state church has been designated to serve the immigrant community and help recent arrivals of all faiths integrate into society. Holocaust education is not a required element of the national school program, but the subject is taught in most schools as part of a mandatory history curriculum.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

There were no reports of physical violence against Jews or acts of violence against, or vandalism of, Jewish community institutions. Incidents of harassment were rare.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuse by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. If members of religious minorities face discrimination, it is more indirect in nature, taking the form of prejudice and lack of interfaith or intercultural understanding. The country has a small, close-knit, homogenous society that closely guards its culture and is not accustomed to accommodating outsiders. Although most citizens are not active members of the state church, Lutheranism is still an important part of the country's cultural identity. Harassment of the country's tiny, inconspicuous Jewish community is infrequent and not organized.

During the last decade, there has been increased awareness of other religious groups, and informal interfaith meetings, seminars, and courses have been held. In May 2005, the National Church for the first time organized an interfaith meeting of the leaders of major registered religious groups (defined as those with 150 or more members). Attendees decided to establish a permanent Interfaith Forum that will foster dialogue and strengthen links between religious groups. A second meeting was planned for August 2005.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The Embassy also maintains a regular dialogue on religious freedom issues with the leaders of various religious groups and nongovernmental organizations. For example, in May 2005, the Ambassador invited members of the Muslim community, as well as aid workers, parliamentarians, and journalists returned from Muslim-majority countries, to his residence for a discussion on how to break down barriers between Islam and the West.

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